

Exploiting the Confederate Battle Flag: Anti-segregationists show their Southern roots

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While the Confederate battle flag continues to hold salience, most notably as a powerful sentiment of the Lost Cause and as a symbol of racial oppression, under the same banner during the Civil Rights Movement, Southern-affiliated white students organized for civil rights and an end to a class society. One group, the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), sought to challenge old Southern myths by appropriating the flag as a representation of a “democratic and integrated” New South. (SSOC, 1964) For another group, the Young Patriots Organization, the flag symbolized the “revolutionary solidarity” of the poor and working-class poor. (Young Patriots Organization) Reassignment of the battle flag’s symbolism never materialized. The organizations that appropriated the flag in the Civil Rights era were too radical to appeal to the sensibilities of mainstream America, and despite their efforts, community organizers were unable to disassociate the flag from its historical context as a symbol of slavery. Left-leaning, Southern-affiliated groups faced decades of pressure from former Confederates, educators, and politicians to present a sympathetically rewritten southern history that informed the white, Southern conscious. (Dean, 2009, 319-351)

Former Confederates and their affiliates unfolded four intertwined myths idealizing the South which furnished several explanations to white southerners struggling to justify their human and economic losses. Myths like the Old South, created a new regional identity that cast the southerner in a more aristocratic and chivalrous perspective. Similarly, the Solid South united white southerners under the concept of white supremacy to resist the internal threat of black suffrage and the external threat of Northern interference and military occupation.

From its inception on the battlefield, secessionists who regarded themselves in a similar light as American Revolutionary patriots informed the meaning attached to the flag. Post-Civil War Confederate affinity groups drove new interpretations of the battle flag as they sought to rekindle interest in the cause which had been lost to them. Patrons of the New South myth regarded themselves as a chosen people, willing to construct alliances with Northerners that would salvage the South's physical and economic resources. But the United Daughters of the Confederacy disapproved of one New South tenet: the reconciliation of the races

As the graphic representation of the Confederacy, the conception of the flag attracted much emotive attention. Primarily attending to the nuances of its independence and rebellion, the national flag of the Confederate States of America as well as the regimental battle flag of General P. G. T. Beauregard, Army of the Potomac, provoked discussion about practicality, and the flags inspired Confederate nationalism. (Cabell, 68) General Beauregard first conceptualized what is commonly regarded as the Confederate Battle Flag and considered several iterations of the flag. (Brock, 68) "What, in the name of Moses, do we want with a new flag? We have had new ones

enough already” an unnamed correspondent wrote on 28 March 1863 to the editor of *The News*. (*Southern Historical Society Papers, vol. 8, 157*) General Beauregard thought otherwise. At one point during the First Battle of Bull Run, 21 July 1861, Beauregard was unable to identify whether an advancing regiment was for him or against him. Shortly after the battle, Beauregard conceived the idea of a regimental battle flag that was distinctly different from the national flag of the Confederate States of America (CSA) which in battle closely resembled that of the United States. (McCarthy, vol.8, 498) In 1863, William T. Thompson, editor of the Savannah *Daily News*, designed the second national flag of the Confederacy, known as the Stainless Banner. In 1872 George Preble recounted that Thompson breathed a life of racial oppression into the symbol by invoking a racist sentiment when he declared in his newspaper that the national flag of the Confederacy was an emblem of “a superior race, and a higher civilization contending against ignorance, infidelity, and barbarism.” (Preble, 1872, 418)

Southerners recognized and admired in the Stars and Stripes the iconography of the tenets established by the founding fathers. Southern rebels identified with and revered revolutionary patriots who detached themselves from an overbearing and oppressive governing body. (Preble) Confederates were inclined to compare their thwarted quest for the institution of slavery to the earlier struggles against “tyrannical and unconstitutional” acts of the British. (Preble) Although the founding fathers of the United States declared that “all men are created equal,” Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens insisted in his “Cornerstone Address” in March 1861 that the locus of secession hinged upon the primarily Northern and fundamentally wrong notion of equality of the races. Nonetheless, sympathetic sentiments attached to memories of

the American Revolution percolated through rebel states and were revealed in the design of the flag. The triumvirate of red, white, and blue denoted republicanism and in heraldry represented the virtues of valor, purity, and truth. One hundred years hence, two Southern-affiliated groups with an affinity for social revolution would, like the founding fathers of the United States, exercise their right to battle oppression while they claimed the Confederate flag as their standard.

From the perspective of white history, the South formed memorial associations like the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. In fact, the collective memory of a devastated South was strategically and methodically reconstructed to foster an emotional and romantic oversimplification of the events and symbols surrounding the Civil War. (Heyse, vol. 38, 408-432) The Daughters of the Confederacy ignored the African-American narrative and attended exclusively to the subjective memory of white Southerners. They erected monuments and statuary to promote the ideology of the Lost Cause myth and to amplify the heroism of Confederate leaders and soldiers. In addition, in an effort to resurrect white Southern nationalism, they wrote a series of catechisms for their children to memorize and recite. Catechisms were the imagined and emotional rhetoric devoted to the glorification of the Confederacy, and they diminished the role that slavery played in the commencement of the Civil War. (408-432)

The Myth of the Lost Cause redefined the concept of reconstruction-era Southern nationalism and embodied the concept of independence advanced by American Revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century. Lost Cause proponents rebelled against a list of trampled rights and outside aggressors and were heralded as virtuous heroes,

much like those in the Revolutionary War. They adopted rhetoric that in their view paralleled the grievances of the founding fathers. It rejected the authority of the Union to decide what was best for individual states by defending states' rights and the institution of slavery. It pronounced that Southern states were unfairly attacked and eventually overwhelmed by the magnitude of Northern manpower and financial assets. In addition, white Southerners identified carpet baggers and newly elected black officials as corrupt. (Dean) They were successful in their attempts to transform the southern consciousness. Although a fusion of the Southern myths survived, the myth of the Lost Cause attached itself to popular culture. The implication of the Confederate battle flag as a memorial to Confederate veterans gave way and it emerged as the epitome of Southern heritage.

New players offered aid to anti-segregationists during the Civil Rights Movement in the chronic alienation of the races. Southern college students opposed to segregation exploited the flag, as well as poor white Southerners living in the north who sought to eradicate their class-based society. White college students interested in civil rights formed the SSOC advocating for democracy and justice for all races in a "New South." (SSOC Pamphlet) The Young Patriots, a group of radical, poor, white, Chicagoan transplants from Appalachia, allied with the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords to organize against neighborhood social problems.

The SSOC redesigned the image of the Rebel flag to serve dual functions reflecting the combined rebellion of contemporary white and African American students and to appeal to the regional identity of their Southern peers. (SSOC Report on Southwide Conference, 1964) One Lynchburg College alumnus reported that in April

1964, representatives of forty-five white Southern colleges from ten southern states, including Lynchburg College, met to evaluate civil rights activities on their campuses. (Smith) The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), chaired by Marion Barry, who later became a controversial mayor of Washington, D.C., sponsored the founding meeting. They gathered to assess the interest in organizing to act on social, economic, and political dilemmas. While members of SNCC focused their efforts on black campuses, they established SSOC to appeal to students of both races on predominantly white Southern campuses. (Braden, Memo to the Southern Student Organizing Committee, April 1964) Further, they sought to avoid alienation between black activists and their white counterparts. In addition, SNCC members wished to avert a potential takeover by white activists. (Smith) The SSOC's adaptation of the flag incorporated SNCC's primary symbol: black and white hands clasped together but superimposed over the original Confederate battle flag. (SSOC, Student Involvement: a New Politics for a New South, November 1964) Bruce Smith, one of three Lynchburg College students at the founding of SSOC, described his attachment to the flag,

For white students like me, who grew up in the South, the symbolism seemed perfect. The flag represented a heritage in the rebellious Old South, and the black and white hands shaking symbolized our rebellion in the new, integrated South. Although SSOC was attacked by other radical students for using the old symbol of the racist South, we continued to use the symbol with black and white hands over it until the group was dissolved in 1969. The symbol caused people to do lots of double takes, and we hoped, think about what the dual symbolism must mean. (Smith)

Bruce recalled that although other radical students attacked SSOC for its use of a racist symbol, with one brief hiccup in 1964, it served the organization until its dissolution in 1969. (Smith) The inception of Smith's social activism stemmed from an incident the previous winter. Students from Lynchburg College and Randolph Macon Women's College picketed the offices of Lynchburg newspapers, *The News* and *The Daily Advance*. They protested the paper's response to a local high school teacher's firing for inviting a peace marcher to his civics class. Smith recounts that although Lynchburg College officials originally defended the actions of the picketers, with subsequent publicity they renounced their endorsement. Professor Sheldon Vanauken, however, championed their cause and sponsored the SSOC chapter on the campus. Smith described Vanauken as "one of the most ardent defenders of the SSOC symbol." (Smith)

Activists like Marion Barry and Anne and Carl Braden trundled out their social polemic in the presence of Smith and his fellow Lynchburg College students at the meeting in Nashville. (Smith) In this assembly, the SSOC repudiated a 35-year old statement by the Southern Fugitive group which challenged the demise of Southern culture. Their 1929 statement, *We'll Take Our Stand*, explicitly resisted the problems associated with racial integration, industrialization, and urbanism in the South by expressing the desire to maintain the status quo. SSOC members hoped to establish a movement to confront the situations about which the Southern Fugitives disapproved, namely. segregation. Additionally, SSOC addressed demoralizing living conditions and political injustices aimed predominantly at African Americans. (SSOC, *We'll Take our Stand*, April 1964) The SSOC sidestepped racist sentiments attached to the flag like

those of William T. Thompson. In their assignment of the flag, SSOC members avoided other elements of Southern myths as well, like white superiority and the moral justness of protecting the rights of individual states.

One SSOC pamphlet exhibiting the battle flag called on like-minded but isolated white college students across the South to organize for a “new order.” (SSOC, CITE Pamphlet) Although their branding acknowledged the traditions of both black and white cultures, SSOC appealed largely to white students. In fact, one member regarded a new Southern nationalism as both difficult and dangerous. He stated, “this is especially true for one who would fashion a new banner from the cloth of a region,” mired in the Southern roots of states’ rights, racial oppression, and the early twentieth century Pellagra epidemic among poor whites., (Hamlett, Toward Southern Nationalism in the New South Student, December 1966) A new image was in order that would reflect the burgeoning collaboration with and the inclusion of black students was in order. The National Student Association Southern Project, an organization concentrating on equal access to higher education and racial equality on college and university campuses, was anxious to guide the infant SSOC and weighed in.

M. Hayes Mizell, Director of the National Student Association Southern Student Human Relations Project, prepared a report in December 1964 for the SSOC Executive Committee which analyzed the efficacy of SSOC and pressed them to establish an identity that assimilated the strengths and weaknesses of “moderate/new liberal” and “more committed/radicals” of the left.” (Mizell, The NSA Southern Project Looks at SSOC, December 20, 1964) NSA defined the moderate/new liberal student as middle class, either white or black, law-abiding, religious, and with a newfound interest in

challenging contemporary social conditions. Moderates and newly liberal students unwilling to completely reject their middle-class sensibilities nevertheless, added value to SSOC through the assimilation of their ideals within their particular society. The renovated image of the flag honored their southern pedigree.

The reaction of committed black and white radicals to injustice and poverty served as a delineation between the arcs of moderate and liberal. Presumably, radicals from similar middle-class backgrounds as moderates acted with more energy and vehemence. Former moderates emerged as more knowledgeable and sophisticated “full-time agitators” compelled to reject middle-class social and economic notions. (Mizell) They sacrificed the comforts of their class-based society to achieve “radical solutions to problems,” but the Confederate emblem did not necessarily secure support from white radicals and blacks in the Movement. (Mizell)

Leadership within SSOC relied too greatly on the influence of other organizations, contended the NSA. SSOC required strong leadership and radical action within its organization to avoid acquiescing to stronger groups like SNCC. Mizell insisted that SSOC establish and promote its own policies, programs, and image.

Weeks after its first conference, SSOC leaders invited field organizer Anne Braden of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc. to advise SSOC in regard to sustaining its affiliation with SNCC. Braden, an energetic proponent of racial equality and an alumnus of Randolph Macon Woman’s College, concluded in her *Memo to the Southern Student Organizing Committee* that continued collaboration between SSOC and SNCC would be both a benefit and a hindrance to the goals of SSOC. Her approach, endorsed by her husband and fellow activist, Carl Braden, proposed that

SSOC temper its message to appeal to the moderate white Southern student because, she cautioned, moderates would be repulsed by an association with the militant SNCC. Not surprisingly, at its *Southwide Fall Conference 1964* on the campus of Gammon Seminary, a historically African American institution, the Confederate flag was briefly abandoned. (SSOC, Report on Southwide Fall Conference, November 13-15, 1964)

Speakers and seminars at the conference focused on complex social problems. They emphasized civil rights and liberties, poverty and deprivation, and non-partisan student involvement. Ed Hamlett, who served dual roles as a member of SSOC's Executive Committee and director of SNCC's white student project, pressed conference attendees the first night to recruit more black students. SNCC'S rumored shift from black college campuses to the black community furnished the circumstances for a more integrated SSOC. Eight days after the beginning of the conference and after lengthy discussion, members agreed that the overt symbol of racism appearing on buttons and the SSOC newsletter would discredit SSOC's message and detract from its ability to integrate the organization.

At its spring conference in 1965, SSOC fine-tuned their agenda while they enlarged their emphasis to include a more conceptual approach to global social problems. (SSOC, Report on Spring Conference, May 19-21, 1965) Besides integration, they devoted more resources to poverty and developing a democratic society of universally equal political representation. The keynote speaker, Stokely Carmichael, then Field Secretary of SNCC, later rose to prominence in the Black Panther Party. They favored a more radical approach to engender change, and

channeling the Confederate flag was no longer considered the most effective means to reach radical-thinking, black and white college students. Conference participants endorsed the upcoming Students for a Democratic Society “March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam.” Although the aims of SSOC and its Northern counterpart, the Young Patriots Organization, held similarities, the political terrain from which the Young Patriots emerged was symptomatic of their daily struggles.

Working-class white communities in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago divested themselves of their Southern communities in response to the lure of employment. They did not, however, seamlessly assimilate to their new surroundings. Albert Votaw, the executive director of the Uptown Chicago Commission, confirmed the animosity between its poor, white residents and city officials. In his 1958 article in *Harper's Magazine*, “Hillbillies Invade Chicago,” he grumbled that 70,000 hillbillies were disturbing the city’s peace, and that “Southerners bring along suspicion of the authorities.” Besides their cultural resistance to government and law enforcement, their problems were predominantly economic, which helped inform the political ideology of these Uptown transplants.

Under the auspices of the Confederate flag, Young Patriots like William “Preacherman” Fesperman, Peggy Terry, and Junebug Boykin organized to combat what they considered the oppressive, heavy-handed tactics of Chicago’s civic leaders. But, the arrival of SDS in Uptown created within the community of Appalachian transplants, blacks, and Latinos, a heightened social and political awareness. The *Young Patriots Eleven Point Program*, branded with the image of the Confederate flag, a crouching panther representing the Black Panther Party, and the symbol of the Young

Lords, a raised hand holding a firearm, addressed class disparity. Additionally, they railed against law enforcement officers, public education, Selective Service, unions, racism, unsanitary living conditions, inadequate medical care, and the Vietnam War. They advanced neighborhood social programs to feed children, provide medical care, and offer employment options other than day laboring. Before SDS entered the Uptown community, political activists Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman projected problems within an "Interracial Movement of the Poor." They predicted that visible contradictions of historical white and black identities would prevent black activists from relinquishing their hostilities toward whites. How, then, would the Confederate battle flag with its implication of racial oppression contribute to the multi-racial front proposed by Hayden and Wittman and by multi-racial activists in Uptown?

Like some of their contemporaries who relied on the flag to generate a fervent of emotion for past glories, the Young Patriots consigned the flag as a symbol of rebellion against an oppressive and powerful government. On the *11 Point Program* flyer, above the quote, "We are all slaves in the eyes of the man," the image of the Confederate battle underscored the duality of their message as an organization: namely, the fundamental identity of Southern heritage tied to the culture of the Lost Cause. The political terrain of revolt against misplaced power credentialed their use of the Confederate flag within the white, working class communities of Uptown. Their identity as Southerners centered on the Confederate flags they handed out in the neighborhood and displayed on their leather jackets. Fifty years after Cha-Cha Jimenez founded the Young Lords, a group of Puerto Ricans who shifted from gang activities to human rights activities; he interviewed Hy Thurman about their shared experiences. Thurman, a

founding member of the Young Patriots from eastern Tennessee, moved to Chicago at the age of 17, and he recalled the inception of the Patriots:

It's not white power per se, but a white power that respected all people. We were trying to take that flag and give it a whole different definition . . . of what that flag stood for, and I think we did. We were using phrases like 'Power to the people' and equality as a basis for that flag because we wanted to tear down what that flag meant . . . for a whole new definition.

A complicated narrative unfolded among rivals in the neighborhood of working-class whites, Latinos, and African-Americans. At first, the flag caused consternation among their allies, the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords of Lincoln Park, a radical organization with Latin roots. Nonetheless, they transcended cultural affiliations and race to form the original Rainbow Coalition in response to shared class struggles and racial tension. (Thurman) The public image of non-violent civil rights leaders working within the confines of the law dictated that leaders demonstrate conformity by their attire of conservative suits. The Black Panther Party, however, adopted a more radical uniform as a symbol of their militant message. Black leather jackets testified to their resistance to social conventions. Members of the Young Patriots stitched the Confederate flag on jackets and berets and incorporated the image in buttons as a deliberate statement against the oppressive authority of employers, government officials, law enforcement, and social workers. In the end, Cha-Cha Jimenez explained that a shared sense of nationalism led the Young Lords to respect the decision of the Patriots to adorn themselves with the badge of the Confederacy. "In order to

understand it, you have to understand the influence of nationalism.” In his reminiscences, Michael James, who published the Uptown newspaper, *Rising Up Angry*, under the auspices of the SDS, recalled that the collaboration between interracial organizations magnified their efforts, “In relative short order we became known, and we influenced people, changing the way many looked at race, gender, and war and justice issues. We were making our mark.” (Michael James, *Rising Up Angry and Chicago’s Early Rainbow Coalition 1968-1975*) Nonetheless, justification did not portend acceptance of a new meaning for the flag. The discontent of Chicago hillbillies did not transcend to moderate, middle-class Southerners. Furthermore, conservative moderates revealed their bias in a series of newspaper articles in the *Chicago Tribune*.

One article scorned the groups of whites and Puerto Ricans as street gangs. (“Leave Today Invaders told at Seminary”) The coalition of Young Patriots, Concerned Citizens of the Survival Front, the Latin American Defense Organization, and the Young Lords in May 1969 occupied the administrative offices of the nearby McCormick Seminary to demand that \$600,000 of seminary funds be used to provide affordable housing in the neighborhood. Properties owned by absentee landlords were dilapidated, vermin infested, and divided into sub-standard one and two-room efficiency apartments occupied mainly by entire families of poor Appalachian transplants. The coalition was afraid that neighborhood gentrification would drive up the cost of rent and force low-income families from the area. Another program of interest to the Patriots was the city’s proposal to build a neighborhood junior college. Revitalization would displace ninety percent of Southern immigrants. (“Uptown College Site Foes Give Their Plan”) The city disregarded the coalition’s proposal to build the Hank Williams Village,

an alternative community to the college which would include housing, schools, and health care facilities for the people.

In Mike Gray and Howard Alk's film *American Revolution II: Right On*, a tandem spirit of revolution and Southern birthright emerged at a neighborhood meeting of transplanted hillbillies. Bobby Lee, a member of the Chicago branch of the Black Panther Party, urged the group to denounce Chicago Mayor Daley's heavy-handed police tactics and politically motivated neighborhood revitalization. When Lee addressed the meeting, a white onlooker goaded the group to unify with the more experienced Panthers toward "an understanding among the people and collusion between the people to stick together." At stake was a 38 million dollar fund to fight poverty, and the Patriots demanded a voice in determining the best use of those funds. Lee commiserated with the plight of the hillbillies, and he underscored their commonalities by emphasizing their shared poverty and class struggles. Although the Patriots identified themselves as members of an oppressed minority rather than the white majority, their identity as revolutionaries punctuated their adoption of the Confederate flag.

Revolution against a powerful federal government that sought to control individual states, particularly those in the South, provided rationalization of the Civil War and the context of the Lost Cause. Southern-affiliated youth seeking an end to racism, segregation, and a class society resurrected the solidarity of the CSA. Like the SSOC, Young Patriots' inherited Southern myths shaped their goals and appealed to their peers. The essence of the Confederate flag as a symbol of rebellion against an oppressive government alienating the races and preventing upward mobility emerged

from students seeking a “New South” and from Appalachian transplants to the north. But political militancy did not appeal to mainstream southerners, and reassignment of the battle flag’s symbolism never materialized. In the context of revolutionary interracial alliances, the Confederate flag struck a discord with old Southern myths. The foothold achieved by the Lost Cause was too firm to displace the emotions generated by the flag as a symbol of Southern heritage and replace it with an inclusive, color-blind interpretation.

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